

Wednesday, 12-19-84
senior articles editor, Atlantic.

1 1. Corby Kummer,

--Bottom line (after long discussion of my publishing problems in the past):

--An article, expressing what I most want to put out to the public, what I really want to write, would be less daunting to begin and to pursue than a book.

--If I wanted, the article could be incorporated or expanded later into a book.

--I can always write my memoirs, "any time," later. If that's not what I really want to work on now, I shouldn't do it: despite pressure to do an autobiography [because I could get a bigger advance for an autobiography; it would have a much bigger audience, readership; the ultimate profits would be much greater, especially because of the likely tie-in to a TV production or movie...]

--[What I "want" to do is ambiguous. I feel a strong obligation to write on the nuclear issue; I have invested much time in preparing to do it; I am now ready to do it; I know what I want to say; I do want to do it (it would not be right to say that I feel I should do it but don't really want to). That is not to say, however, that it would be as easy for me to write as an autobiography. I have a strong sense that I could write the latter, or much of it, at least, fairly easily; more easily, given the relative nature of the subject matter. The problem is that I don't really feel that I want to write that in the way that I do the nuclear material. If I did the autobiography, it would be mainly either for the money or because I was forced to conclude that, for whatever reason, it was all that I could bring myself to write. (E.g., as arose recently with Michael McCarthy, a TV or movie production might be the occasion to get me to research and write an autobiography: if I made the choice to undertake that joint project.)]

--(Kummer) I should call William Whitworth of Atlantic and interest him in an article. Kummer doesn't think that the overlap with Thomas Powers' articles in Atlantic would be a problem. "He's not you; you would be writing it from your perspective; and if some time had elapsed..." (Of course, the fact that they published Powers' three articles shows the editors' interest in the subject. No other magazine, in fact, has published comparable material.)

2. Sidney Lens, same evening, tells me he had talked with his agent, Eleanor Wood, of Blasingame, McCarthy and Wood, 432 Park Ave. S. NY 10016, 212-532-7377. She said I could not just go into a publisher and get an advance on the basis of my name,

but that I should be able to get a sizeable advance (he mentioned \$50,000) for a projected autobiography (emphasizing my political development and experiences). (Sy, I think, thinks in terms of larger money, "if I'm willing to be really candid, about people I worked with, and to some extent my personal life.")

Sid feels strongly that I should go for a book rather than an article.

--An article could be almost as hard to write, or harder than a book. "A short piece can be harder."

--He thinks an article would kill a big advance. When the book has been written, or is contracted for, articles could be drawn from it; but a publisher won't give a big advance when the guts of the book has already appeared. (He wrote The Day Before Doomsday first as an article, intending to make it into a book, "But my name isn't as well known as yours.")

Sid seemed to be focussing largely on the advance, and money to "solve my money problems." I put it to him that a publisher would almost surely urge me to cover not only the nuclear argument and personal involvement (if I proposed a book on nuclear policy and history) but also the Pentagon Papers and Watergate: which would mean Vietnam as well. That is, a full autobiography.

Likewise, I suspected that a big agent (like Sterling Lord) would have a bias toward urging me to do this sort of big-selling book, which would mean more money for him as well as the publisher (more saleable to the publisher, because more saleable to the public) and for me.

Lens discounted this last point. His experience was that an agent, who would want a lifetime relationship covering much writing, would take my desires into account and be helpful. He urged me to discuss all this candidly with an agent--Lord (who, Bill Gibson mentioned, is also Norman Mailer's agent!)--and get his advice.

--In favor of an article:

--Gets out faster.

--May reach more people.

--Can be more analytical (though still also personal) than an autobiography is likely to be (given space pressures, and pressures from the publisher...and agent?)

--May be psychologically much less daunting and inhibiting to me: i.e., more likely actually to get started on and finished, and published. (Lens seemed to pay little attention to this; though when he did, he stressed that a long piece could be easier to write than a short one. This has some validity; though

it applies less to a long article, compared to a book, especially a short book.

--A book devoted only to the nuclear issues--if it was also autobiographical, not abstract or impersonal--might really cut into the possibility of a big-deal comprehensive autobiography: unless, in effect, my autobiography came out in two parts, nuclear first.

--An article, on the other hand, devoted only to the nuclear issues, could leave out all the Pentagon Papers episode, all of Vietnam, all of Watergate. An autobiography would cover all these (while leaving out the nuclear analysis, strategy, etc.) along with background and personal life, so the earlier article should hardly interfere with selling such a book either to a publisher or to the public or TV. An account of my anti-nuclear activism could go in either the article or the book. It could very well be featured more in the article than the later book; or it could be in a short book expanding on the nuclear article.

--I said most of this to Lens, who was unconvinced. He thought I should definitely go for a book; but emphasized that I should rely on the advice of an agent, not himself, myself (I didn't know the book business; and I needed to learn my options) or an editor biased toward getting an article from me for his magazine.

3. Bill Gibson, later the same evening:

--"When did I last write an article?" Three years ago. "Then I would probably find it much easier to launch into an article, and see how it went, then to undertake a book, that would take a year or two." It would be harder ever to get started writing the book. (I think this is not so true for a real autobiography; but it might well be true for a nuclear piece).

--He doesn't agree that an article would necessarily interfere with a book. (Though I think Lens was looking more at the question of an advance than of actually getting a book project accepted, or the sale of the book).

[It occurs to me that one way of converging these two approaches would be to sell the book project, with the understanding that--for several reasons--an article on nuclear strategy, including personal material from the autobiography, would appear first. The later autobiography would leave out most of the analysis of strategy and policy, and a good deal of this personal material.]

4. My own personal inclination at this moment would be to agree with Kummer (and Gibson): to write exactly what I most want to get out, sooner than would be likely in the case of a book, in

the form of a long article, with Atlantic as the best vehicle. (The New Yorker is the only real competitor. Harper's a possibility, not likely for reasons of politics and space). If the response to the article justified it, it could be put out as book, somewhat expanded (e.g., with the addition of documents). In fact, two or three articles could well be justified, on this subject alone: which would include the Cuban Missile Crisis, etc. None of this would compete with an autobiography covering more the period mid-1964-74. (In fact, the book could be more analytical than the prior articles, or the autobiography. Kummer suggested that I might find it easier to write relatively technical articles--for International Security Affairs, Foreign Affairs or Foreign Policy, etc.--after I had written the more popular articles, which are both more politically relevant and more timely as well as easier to write. These could be included in a short nuclear book, in the text or as appendices.)

Reflections on "publishing problem" (reflecting discussion with Corby Kummer, 12-19-1984):

1. I don't really have a writing problem; I have a publishing problem. When I write at all, I write fast. I don't always write well, but I always write fast, and sometimes well. I don't sit in front of a typewriter, blocked from writing or wondering what to write. The problem is to get me to sit in front of a typewriter, or eventually, getting myself to let go of a piece and send it off. That is, starting and finishing: not writing.

2. (As noted by MBG) The pieces I have started, finished and published have almost invariably--perhaps invariably--been requested by someone, either with a deadline or with eventual pressure by that person to finish. Thus, I had an audience (editorial, and eventual public) in mind before beginning; and I knew that someone, at least, wanted the piece. Usually I faced the pressure eventually that some publication--magazine, book--was being or would be held up if I didn't finish promptly.

3. In the case of my one book, Papers on the War (which consisted largely of such pieces, written earlier under these conditions), Patricia provided me what was both the necessary prod and an "excuse" for letting go: "If you don't finish this now, you'll be correcting page proofs in prison, because you won't have prepared for your trial." So I was able to say in the Introduction: "This is the best I can do now: I have to go. It isn't what I think, in all respects, at this moment--I have more to say on these matters and my opinions have changed on some things since I wrote the pieces presented here--but I don't have time to correct and add, because I'm about to go on trial. Anyway, all this would still be true if I delayed."

Or precisely (p. 12, Touchstone edition): "I repeat the premise [p. 10: "In my opinion this war, even at this late stage, needs not only to be resisted; it remains to be understood"]:
efforts at better understanding cannot be put off till the triumph of resistance, the end of the war (any more than continued resistance can await a perfect understanding).

"It was in this belief that I undertook, beginning in the fall of 1969, to reveal to Congress and the American people the documents and analyses that came to be known as the Pentagon Papers. That was, of course, itself an act of resistance, but of a particular sort, aimed at a broader and ultimately better understanding of the war process. And it is in that same spirit that I offer these essays.

"Like the Pentagon Papers themselves, they are limited, incomplete, at most a useful contribution to a discussion that must occupy many different voices for many years. Far from purporting to be the last word, they are not my own last words on any subject, or even, in many cases, my most recent

thinking....Having arrived at some tentative conclusions on these matters over the last year, it is frustrating to contemplate releasing a book--based on papers done earlier--that reflects this later work only in small part and that does not fully exploit the general accessibility, at last, of the documents in the Pentagon Papers.

"But it is this book or nothing for quite a long time, as I have at last come to acknowledge. Events in my life since June, 1971, have not been conducive to the production of new, finished essays, though I spent most of the fall in the effort, filling files with notes and drafts. Meanwhile the indictment against me is not winding down any more than the bombing is winding down; the most recent of legal charges, increasing the original two counts to a dozen, resolved my dilemma for the immediate future. For the next six months my further contributions to public understanding of the issues of the war must be through the medium of the trial, or trials, rather than by extending these writings.

"But these are merely an author's private misgivings. Had I time to present here my latest conjectures, the results would still have been tentative, incomplete, transitional. If my thinking on the Cold War and other matters is not what it was last year, when the last of these essays was written, it is not what it will be next year either. Meanwhile, the war goes on and demands to be understood: and there is no doubt in my mind that these pieces have their contribution to make to that evolving understanding.

"This, then, is a book about US policy in the war: not about me, or how I revealed the Pentagon Papers, or even about the Pentagon Papers themselves."

4. Amazing to reread this passage now. I am in a remarkably similar position now, with respect to a book on nuclear history, strategy and policy--and resistance--except that most of the essays or chapters that would comprise it have yet to be finished or published. They exist, if at all outside my head, in the form of notes, lecture transcripts or tapes, or draft fragments. The same disclaimer would be necessary, at least tacitly: it is not, yet, a book about how I came to reveal the Pentagon Papers, or about me (except--as in Papers on the War--as I describe my personal involvement in some matters in passing), or about the Pentagon Papers.

Nor would it yet reveal (much, or the whole story) about matters of reader interest that had not yet emerged when I wrote the above Introduction in 1972: the trial, the plumbers and Nixon's involvement with me, the revelations about these in Watergate proceedings and the consequent effects on Nixon's downfall and later the ending of the war. (There would be a challenge to include some of these things in a nuclear book, because of the interrelation of Nixon's nuclear strategy and

threats and his actions against me. This would pose a strategic dilemma, because a "nuclear" book that included all this would, after all, compete with a later autobiography. Indeed, a book about nuclear policy and threats would most naturally include an account of Nixon's threats in 1969 and later. And having described these, it would be tempting to include--almost unnatural or misleading not to include--how those threats led to Nixon's and Kissinger's concern about my possible revelations and what their actions against me led to. Yet this would preempt a major part of the interesting revelations of a full-scale autobiography: which would also include my Vietnam experience, my earlier and personal life, and the whole Pentagon Papers episode.)

5. Thus, a choice confronting me this time would be whether to proceed to write a series of essays, publishing them separately and then again collecting them into a book, or simply to project and commence writing a book from the beginning. Sid Lens strongly urges the latter. Advantages of the former approach might include:

- a) more timely contributions to the ongoing nuclear debate;
- b) possibly, in some cases, a larger audience than a whole book on nuclear matters might attain;
- c) more ease for me psychologically in beginning and completing individual articles than a whole book (this is suggested by Kummer and Gibson; questioned by Lens; it is not entirely in accord with my experience working over the Crown manuscript);
- d) I might have the advantage of starting with the assured interest of an editor and vehicle I respect: the Atlantic or New York Review of Books;
- e) In the case of the NYRB, I might have the psychological advantage of being encouraged to respond to past or new books in the field.

6. As I write this, I have just had a talk with MBG, who had independently reached the conclusion (having been thinking practically about getting around my publishing block) that "without any question" I should begin on articles on nuclear subjects, which would later be the basis for a book. This both for timeliness (and importance of subject matter) and for the psychological capability to begin and finish.

7. On approaching an agent (Mailer says Lord is very good), MBG thinks that he would accept the idea of my starting with articles if that was what I wanted, because he would be anxious to represent me (looking toward the future, and the big, lucrative book). Also, an agent would probably be understanding of the need to do things in whatever manner is most likely to "nurture the sprout" and get a book actually written.

8. Various people, in urging me to do a big autobiography, sometimes in relation to TV or a movie, have asserted that "This is really the only way to get my nuclear message out, or any other message, to a mass audience. Otherwise, a publisher won't buy it, and the public won't read it." (Sy Hersh, David Obst...). I have never really believed that an autobiography was a suitable vehicle for the nuclear message. First, it would get lost, amid the personal drama and the rest of the subject matter: Vietnam, Watergate, etc. It would not be what people were reading the book for, or what they would be likely to take away.

Second, there is so much to cover in an autobiography that there will be heavy pressure to compress and omit, and "messages"--let alone real analyses, let alone nuclear history in which I'm not personally involved--are almost certain to be excluded.

9. On the other hand, an article will not only come out sooner, but it is actually likely to be read by far more people than would read a book: in particular, a book on nuclear issues. Articles could present history, analysis, speculation, prediction, along with personal anecdotes: no problem. And once I had written several articles (or even one long one), I could choose either to collect them into a book, or rework the subject matter into a book (with much less trouble than starting from scratch). Or I could well feel that I had discharged my obligation to inform the public on these matters with the articles, and proceed immediately to an autobiography without worrying about a nuclear book. (I could easily collect the articles into a book of essays without looking for a big advance or even sale).

10. MBG strongly agrees with 8 and 9. I recalled that the Crown manuscript left me unsatisfied only because I thought of it as a book: much more had to be included in a "book," especially in my first book on the subject, and my first in a decade. Moreover, the style worried me for a book. I don't think I would have had any difficulty in accepting it, and even completing a version fairly quickly, if I had thought of it as a long article (for which I had an editor who wanted it). In fact, it would be a starting point for at least one of several articles right now. Other lecture transcripts should also be looked at.

11. Certain considerations that have inhibited me in the past do not seem to apply now. As I talked to Kummer, I reflected on the fact that I had long had in the back of my mind that I might want to end up teaching in a university. To keep open the option of being accepted in a mainline department in an elite university, it seemed important to me to avoid certain kinds of appearances in print. Under my circumstances, I suspected that popular lecturing, interviews, TV appearances did not prejudice an academic future irrevocably; but that signed articles by me that did not meet scholarly standards would probably do so. Therefore it seemed important that at least my first published writings

since my book meet such standards. (This was a major problem, in my mind, with the Crown manuscript). I had particularly in mind the audience of my old RAND and Pentagon colleagues; I felt, semi-consciously, that I wanted to show them "I could still do it." And I wanted to avoid put-down by them and other academics that I had "sold out to popular appeal." (Signed writings had a potential for this that lectures and TV appearances did not: I thought).

What has changed is that after my courses at Irvine and Harvard (which did not differ much from my experience at Stanford), my desire to be a course or seminar teacher, or even to be part of a university, has declined sharply. Likewise, my sense of the likelihood of my ever being accepted as a professor, specifically at Harvard (along with my desire to be). I find, I think (these recognitions are very recent) that this has a liberating effect on my contemplated writing, just as when I left RAND in the summer of 1970.

In fact, what has liberated me to do what I have done in the last dozen years--what has freed me to say what I have, where and to whom--was precisely my recognition in the fall of 1969 that I no longer cared ever again to work for a President of the US, of either party. It is precisely because they have not given up that option that none of the many colleagues who shared my basic views and even the strength of my concerns (except, finally, Morton Halperin, and perhaps, later, Roger Morris) have ever brought themselves to say, let alone publish, comparable things.

Second, a major pattern in my "blockages" has been the fear that proceeding with a piece of writing threatened an important personal relationship. With my Quagmire Myth, it was the subject matter that threatened my relationships at RAND: the block dissolved the minute I left RAND. With my article for New Left Review, the piece they wanted threatened my friendship with EP Thompson; I couldn't see a way around it, and never finished it (nor did I regret that).

The main, recurrent problem was that the very process of writing, involving total absorption and round-the-clock writing in the later phases, strongly threatened (or so I thought, with reason) my most important relationship, with Pat. But I think that both she and I are prepared to take the risk at least of experimenting, with strong reason to believe we can now avoid this.